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DISCUSSION

ENGLISH LITERATURE AND THE COLLEGE FRESHMAN—A REPLY

The article by Miss H. S. Hughes entitled "English Literature and the College Freshman," which appeared in the November *School Review*, should cause teachers of English both in the preparatory school and in the college to pause and reflect. The situation as depicted here is indeed deplorable. If the secondary school is turning out pupils after four years' training so utterly lacking in the knowledge of the ABC's of English literary history, so helpless in essentials of general culture, as is here represented, then, as the author of the article suggests, there must be something fundamentally wrong in the high-school method and curriculum; therefore, the college under present conditions can hope to accomplish little for the Freshman toward training for advanced work in English.

The author concludes, on the basis of her very interesting tables and charts, first, that the high school is failing to accomplish certain things expected of it; secondly, that certain things legitimately left untouched by the high school rarely come to the student from outside; thirdly, that too little emphasis is laid on the matter of historical relations by such a study of the background of a piece of literature as should add to the vividness of the student's interest in and appreciation of the book as a whole; finally, that there is a widespread tendency on the part of the high school to neglect the study of lyric poetry. Let us examine these charges in detail.

First, what are these "certain things" which the high school is expected to accomplish? Evidently they involve not only a knowledge of the text itself, but also some of the biographical and historical data connected with it. Theoretically the high school ought to accomplish this much, practically it cannot. The primary aim of the high school (I speak of conditions in the high school particularly, because it is from this class of secondary school that the large majority of college Freshmen come) is to give the student a knowledge and appreciation of a prescribed set of books. Means to this end concern themselves naturally with biographical and historical facts. No teacher, for example, would attempt to present the "De Coverley Papers" to a class without some

account of Addison and Steele as men, and without some effort to revive the social, political, and literary life of the first half of the eighteenth century. But even so, how much of such background as can be given in the short time devoted to this text, is going to stick? If the pupil, after a year or two, remembers anything about the book it is likely to be content, story. An exercise calling for outside knowledge of books, that is, knowledge dealing with dates and authors, is perhaps not as fair a test of what the high school is expected to accomplish for the student in English literature as would be an exercise involving a knowledge of content.

Again, that certain things legitimately left untouched by the high school rarely come to the student from any other source is true but not surprising. Of the high-school students that take the college preparatory course, by no means all have a taste for literature. They represent a wide range of interests: science, arts, languages, mathematics, not English alone. Even when the school succeeds in stimulating in a child of other tastes a liking for literature, the new interest is often checked by conditions outside the school. Such a child may come from a non-reading, even illiterate family, wholly unsympathetic to the influence of books. "You know we have no books at home," was the pathetic answer once made me by a high-school girl to whom I had recommended some outside reading. The high school gives to many children all they ever get of literature. This class of children and that represented by the child of scientific tastes inevitably keep the high school from doing what it might in its English work if it dealt only with children of literary taste, coming from families with background. Thus when students of varied origins and varied interests are brought together in a required course in English and requested unexpectedly to answer a set of questions on books, dates, and authors, a result such as Miss Hughes describes, while depressing, is not unaccountable.

Thirdly, Miss Hughes declares that there is a widespread tendency on the part of the high school to neglect the study of lyric poetry. For this condition she seeks a partial explanation in the fact that lyric poetry requires more delicate handling by the teacher than does narrative poetry, and that narrative poetry is more attractive to boys and to girls of non-literary taste. I believe this explanation to be correct. But Miss Hughes goes on to say: "If properly taught, the lyric, with its personal note and idealistic beauty, should make an appeal to the adolescent mind; and such poetry should have a desirable influence in refining and in defining the ideas and sentiments of that period

of storm and stress." Here I must disagree. I believe that with a few exceptions lyric poetry, as represented by Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Byron, Browning, Arnold, has little place in the high school. However well taught, it is only to the rare soul in the period of adolescence that such poetry appeals. The average high-school pupil is but a child in mental, moral, and emotional development. And even where there is such maturity, it is far better to give good, sane, objective poetry than the lyric with its personal note, which may turn a girl's thoughts in upon herself and thus feed an unwholesome, introspective mood. If, therefore, the high school is neglecting lyric poetry of a personal note I think it is acting wisely.

And yet, after all that can be said in defense of the high school in this matter of preparatory English, we must admit that Miss Hughes's statistics are discouraging. But such an admission leads us to ask the question whether the author's results are fairly representative of the secondary schools of the country. Can it be stated with confidence on the basis of a single test that the secondary schools of the country fail to measure up to what is expected of them in equipping their students for college English?

Eager to discover whether the same test, applied to another set of Freshmen, would meet with any appreciable difference in result, I applied Miss Hughes's test to fifty of my college Freshmen, who represent all sections of the country and who came to me with only such knowledge of literature as they had received at school and at home. My results, compared with those of Miss Hughes, are tabulated below. Groups marked *A* are hers; those marked *B* are mine.

Although in Groups *Ia* and *II* a few of my percentages are lower and a few are the same, in the majority of cases they are considerably higher, and in group *Ib* they are higher in every case. Though there was not a single perfect paper in the set, and though some of the answers were amusingly wide of the mark, such as the ascribing of *Beowulf*, *The Faery Queen*, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, and *The Ancient Mariner* to Chaucer, and *King Lear* to Tennyson, there were more answers that were astonishing in their range and intelligence. For example: Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, *The Noble Nature*; Pope, *The Dunciad*, *The Essay on Criticism*; Johnson, *Rasselas*, *The Lives of the Poets*, *The Rambler*, *Irene*; Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, *Sweetness and Light*; Fielding, *Amelia*; Dryden, *Abasalom and Achitophel*, *Astrea Redux*. Considerable variety was evident in the naming of a work of the author: there were 9 plays of Shakspeare's given, 6 novels of George Eliot's; 12, of Dickens'; 4, of

Thackeray's. There were given 9 poems by Wordsworth, including *The Excursion*, *Westminster Bridge*, and *Tintern Abbey*; 6, by Keats; 6, by Browning; and 9, by Tennyson, including *The Palace of Art* and *Maud*. This range of knowledge, while surprising and gratifying, is not

	A	B	A	B
Ia. Single Work of Author			Ib Author's	Half-Century
Shakspeare	100%*	100%	14%	62%
Milton	100	100	6	48
G. Eliot	92	98	16	20
Dickens	90	100	12	42
Chaucer	86	78	14	32
Thackeray	82	76	6	20
Tennyson	80	98	18	36
Scott	80	98	10	18
Spenser	68	86	0	16
Wordsworth	58	60	14	40
Pope	56	62	0	12
Coleridge	44	92	10	36
Byron	40	50	4	32
J. Austen	36	50	6	12
Arnold	14	44	4	36
S. Johnson	14	64	4	14
Browning	10	26	14	34
Keats	10	20	4	28
B. Jonson	4	40	8	14
Fielding	4	2	2	4
Rossetti	4	14	0	12
Dryden	4	20	0	8
II. Author of the work				
Canterbury Tales			94	94
Faery Queen			90	90
King Lear			88	96
In Memoriam			84	68
Mill on the Floss			80	96
Idylls of the King			78	100
Lycidas			66	100
Rape of the Lock			64	88
Ode on Immortality			60	60
Childe Harold			52	54
Prisoner of Chillon			44	36
Essay on Man			42	52
Pendennis			40	30
Sohrab and Rustum			40	48
Rabbi Ben Ezra			14	12
Christabel			10	38
Blessed Damozel			10	22
Ode to the West Wind			10	26
My Last Duchess			10	14
Alexander's Feast			6	52
Eve of St. Agnes			6	24
Grecian Urn			6	32
Adonais			2	16
Tintern Abbey			0	12

*I have used percentages instead of charts, for they seem clearer for purposes of comparison.

so phenomenal as it at first appears, for it may indicate not so much an acquaintance with these works themselves, as assiduous perusal of Pancoast, Halleck, Moody and Lovett, or other familiar guides to English literary history, assisted by a retentive memory.

That the same test applied to two different groups of Freshmen should give this variation in results may be accounted for largely on the basis of college entrance standards. A college draws the majority of its students from its own locality; hence, whatever the entrance standards of a given college may be, the curriculum of the preparatory schools in that vicinity will inevitably be affected by those standards. In the first instance, this test was applied to a Freshman class in a woman's college in the Middle West; in the second instance, to a woman's college in the East. Whether the results are in each case fairly representative of conditions in these respective sections of the country I should not feel justified in stating on the basis of a single trial. But without further investigation, if one recalls the number of women's colleges of first rank distributed along the coast from Maryland to Massachusetts, and reflects upon their certain influence on the preparatory schools, both public and private, from which they draw the greater number of their students; and moreover when one remembers that many of these private schools, especially in the South, still count literature among the "accomplishments" and devote to it special attention, one must admit that the opportunity for variation in the results of such a test as this is indisputable. Thus the two applications of this test as here recorded may not be an unfair indication of the proportionate difference between the standards of the preparatory schools in the Middle West and in the East. Consequently, the second application of the test would suggest that what may be true of conditions in preparatory schools in one section of the country may not be true of all sections, and that such a test would need to be made in all representative localities before it could be said to show with any degree of accuracy the standard of college Freshmen generally in the essentials of English literature.

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